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MARTIN LUTHER IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT  
CRITICISM

EPHRAIM EMERTON

The decade just passed has witnessed an unusual activity in the production of books about Martin Luther. This activity has been greatly stimulated by the re-introduction of a method of controversy which reasonable men had been hoping was forever silenced. Until about a generation ago there had been two obvious and hopelessly opposed ways of approach to the subject of Luther's character and work. From the one side he was presented as an angel of light; from the other as the type of a depraved and malicious spirit, moved to activity not through any desire to improve the condition of his people but because, being the malignant thing he was, he could not act otherwise. It need hardly be said to the readers of this *Review* that both of these views of Luther are essentially false. They are perfectly intelligible, one equally with the other. They are the natural precipitation of the bitter controversies that gathered about him in his life, and continued long after his death to complicate the political and economic struggles out of which the new Europe of our day was born. In the light of our modern historical method, both views appear crude and unscientific. They represent a way of looking at historical characters and historical events to which we are apt to apply the crushing word "old-fashioned." And in fact it did seem, up to a very few years ago, that these primitive judgments, which classified men into good and bad, angels and fiends, had become a thing of the past. We flattered ourselves that the canons of historical criticism had become so well fixed in the habits of our

modern thought that we were no longer blind to the intermediate shades of quality and motive that determine human action. We thought we had learned that no man is wholly good or wholly bad; that no historical movement is all along one direct line, but that if we would really understand it, we must follow it in its many windings and disentangle it from the many cross-roads of opposing forces that tend to confuse and to obscure it.

For more than half a century scholars had been occupied in delving deeper and deeper into the original sources of historical knowledge, confident that the more completely these were brought out into the light, the more certainly we should be able to eliminate the false and the uncertain and to fix forever the volume of the certain and the true. That confidence was but another expression of one of the most noticeable tendencies of the modern world—the tendency to believe that, in the words of the poet who more than any other was the prophet of modern optimism, “We needs must love the highest when we see it.” A right method, it was supposed, must inevitably lead to sound results. We forgot that there is another side to this matter. We overlooked the bitter fact that learning, right method, intellectual power, may all be perverted to the service of the false and evil as well as applied to the service of the true and the good. It is only when, behind all the apparatus of sound scholarship and beneath all the force of intellectual capacity, there is honesty of purpose, purity of aim, and a genuine love of the liberty which knows no fear of consequences, that we can hope for the highest results of research.

Now if we apply these rather large generalizations to the special case of the study of Luther, we see that what we have ventured to call the “old-fashioned” crudity of judgment was pretty definitely repudiated more than a generation ago. And it is interesting to note that this abandonment of the extreme partisan attitude begins

on the Protestant side. Not only was it a Protestant, it was a Lutheran writer, Professor Julius Köstlin, who gave to the world the earliest considerable study of Luther from an avowedly strict historical point of view. While maintaining the attitude of reverence for the great achievements and the commanding personality of his hero, Köstlin was not blind to the defects and limitations that at many points seem to dim the lustre of his renown. And so it has been with the host of other Protestant scholars who have followed the way marked out by Köstlin. They also have endeavored to preserve what was valuable in the older tradition, and at the same time not to lose the advantage that comes from treating a great human figure in a human way.

But not only Protestants have felt the influence of the modern emphasis upon a truly historical method. Catholic scholars too, trained in the schools of Protestant Germany, began to approach this subject of the Reformation in a markedly fairer spirit. On this side the lead was taken by two men of vast learning and industry, inspired by common zeal to present their side of the great controversy in such a way as to conciliate the scientific spirit of their day. These two men were Johannes Janssen and Ludwig Pastor. Both chose for their field of work the period of European history following upon that of the Middle Ages proper. It was their cue to admit with admirable frankness the evils of the Church system in that period and to acknowledge the need of reformation. In so far they disarmed criticism from the outset. But then came, of course, the question, how this reformation might and ought to have been accomplished. These authors contended that the means of reformation were all indicated by the very constitution of the Church itself. Though the Church was a divine institution, it was in the hands of fallible men, by no means exempt from the passions and follies of human

kind. In its development there must occur those waves of soundness and unsoundness which mark all human endeavor. In its periods of decline it had only to enforce still more strictly that divinely instituted discipline which had so often rescued it from apparently impending ruin, and it would once more assume its rightful place as the infallible guide of human conduct.

From this point of view it followed that all violent reformation deserved rather the name of revolution, with all its attendant horrors and confusions. Revolution might lead to schism, and schism meant the rending of the seamless garment which symbolized the essential unity of the Christian Church. With the actual process of the Reformation under the lead of Luther, these Catholic scholars could therefore have no sympathy; but they were not quite willing to adopt the traditional view of him and his work as criminal. It was not a question of crime, but of blunder. The Reformation was a mistake, and Luther was the victim of a series of errors arising, not from a vicious nature, but from the extravagance of an over-sensitive conscience preyed upon by solitary brooding and working itself out in a continuous sequence of audacious actions.

In defence of this attractive thesis, Janssen in his *History of the German People* and Pastor in his *History of the Papacy* marshalled their evidence in the form of a vast accumulation of quotation from contemporary writings, especially from the writings of the Reformers themselves, and above all from those of Luther. The success of these undertakings was immediate and enormous. The reader, critical or sympathetic, found himself overwhelmed by this mass of apparently unanswerable testimony. The combination of frankness and learning with good temper and a generally respectful tone appeared to be irresistible. Of course a war of counter-demonstrations ensued. Protestant scholars

rushed to the rescue, and the air became lurid with the flames of the combat. It was easy to show that the frankness of the new Catholic presentation was only apparent; that evidence had been twisted and perverted and combined to accomplish the desired result; that after all, the real issue, the justification of the Reformation, remained essentially untouched.

Still, as the smoke of the encounter lifted, it became apparent that henceforth the treatment of the whole subject would have to be set upon another plane. Protestant scholars acknowledged gladly the many contributions to actual knowledge which their confessional opponents had made. Whatever disposition might still linger to represent Luther as something a little more than human was pretty well counteracted by the weight of evidence to the contrary, and on the other hand it seemed impossible that the old violence of assault could ever again be revived. That was the situation so long as the papacy of that remarkable man, scholar, and gentleman, Leo XIII, continued. Pope Leo died in the year 1903 and was succeeded by the Venetian peasant, Giuseppe Sarto, who under the name of Pius X still occupies the throne of St. Peter. Within a year of his accession appeared the first volume of a book called *Luther and Lutheranism*,<sup>1</sup> by a Dominican friar, Heinrich Denifle, who for more than twenty years had held the position of sub-archivist at the Vatican. The thesis of this book was one especially useful in Catholic exhortation—namely, that no one has ever become a recreant to the true faith unless he had previously become a wicked man. Every departure from the doctrine of the one holy and apostolic Church must be traceable to some mental or moral depravity on the part of the erring person.

<sup>1</sup> *Luther und Lutherthum in der ersten Entwicklung*, von P. Heinrich Denifle, O. P. 1904-1909.

In pursuance of this thesis, Denifle brought together and marshalled into one terrible indictment every suggestion which a mind open to that kind of evidence could extract from contemporary literature, and especially from the utterances of Luther himself, pointing toward a depraved imagination and a diseased moral nature as the mainsprings of his activities and the basis of the seductive influence which he exercised over the minds of his followers. It was a frank return to the attitude of a previous age. As to the great learning and ability of the Dominican scholar there could be no manner of doubt. He had demonstrated these in a long series of critical studies of mediaeval institutions, which had won for him the hearty recognition of all competent authorities. He was on his way to England to receive the highest honors of the English academic world, when he died at Munich, June 10, 1905, a little more than a year after the appearance of the first volume of his assault upon Luther. A second and a third volume, from materials which the author had long been gathering, appeared in rapid succession.

This book of Denifle's is not a biography of Luther. It is not even an attempt at this. "I am no Luther-biographer," the author himself says in his preface to the second edition. It is rather a psychological study, based upon historical method and directed to proving the point from which the author sets out, namely, that Luther was merely the mouthpiece for a type of corruption which for more than a century had been creeping into the Church and threatening its very life. It is worth while to follow for a moment the process which Denifle tells us he followed in approaching the subject of his work. He had occupied himself, he says, for many years with studies especially in regard to the University of Paris and the devastation of churches and monasteries in France during the Hundred Years' War; and

this had led him to the conviction that the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries were an almost continuous period of decadence in the spiritual standards of the Church. Rationalism, individualism, paganism, the lust of the flesh, the delight of the eye, had all been slowly sapping the foundations of the structure which the devoted faith of the true Middle Ages had built up. Especially had the world of nominal Christians turned away from that ideal of the Christian life represented by the monastic system with its manifold reactions upon society in general. All this wide-spread discontent and criticism seemed to our Dominican scholar only so many manifestations of the world against the Church, the flesh against the spirit, the devil against Christ. What appears to others as the spirit of enlightenment, leading with all its dangers through struggle and doubt to ultimate clearness and deliverance, this seems to him the spirit of darkness blinding the eyes of the world and causing it to stumble about in uncertainty, until the one divinely appointed guide shall again be able to command its allegiance.

This process of decadence within the Church he finds then typified and personified in Luther. He grants to him, grudgingly, a certain measure of good intention and a barren kind of capacity; but, aside from these dubious endowments, he is to him only the expression of the general corruption of mind and soul to which the unhappy tendencies of the previous century had been inevitably leading. The key to the nature of this so-called reformer is plainly a gross and irresistible sensuality. It is this germ of corruption which poisons all his being and leads him to the other vices which from an early point determine his action. Especially does it lead him, as sensual indulgence always must, into a fatal disregard for truth. The whole world of law and order and religion becomes hateful to him because it seems to

stand in the way of his own selfish desire. Having the spirit of falsehood within him, he lies to himself. Evil becomes good in his sight. When the man of the fifteenth century sinned, he knew he was sinning. He did not try to deceive himself or others with the fiction of a new morality that confounded right and wrong. And because he knew that he was sinning, he kept open for himself a way of reform. There was always for him and his kind the hope that through this sense of sin they might be brought back once more to the kindly bosom of that Mother Church that was always more ready to forgive than to condemn. But for this Luther and his kind there was no such hope. They sinned, and then made a new law to justify their sin. When Luther, moved by uncontrollable desire, broke the vows he had solemnly taken and united himself with a woman who had been through the same process of apostasy, he had the audacity to call this union a marriage and to declare that it had the approval of the divine command.

One sees the cleverness of this method of attack. It is of no avail that Luther, and his defenders to this day, point out the perversion of the system which had led him and countless others into a relation with the world which their sober and mature judgment condemned as false, and out of which therefore every right instinct of their nature taught them to escape. All this could be interpreted as merely an excuse to justify their own perverse and corrupted action. It would not help, to show that a long series of faithful servants of a true Christianity had for generations been protesting against precisely these fictitious restraints upon everything that was natural and right in the closest of human relations. From the days of Gregory VII such protests had not been lacking. They had come, not from men who were seeking justification for their own private acts, but from devoted adherents of the system they were compelled to

criticise. Such men were grieved and pained by the corruption they saw in the holiest places, and advised an entire change as the only means of escape. They had been silenced by the weight of that centralized power that saw in the existing system the only defence of its own authority. But now such voices would be silenced no longer. It was perfectly true that Luther was giving expression to a feeling of restless impatience with fictitious and hypocritical restraints; but this was done only that a new Christianity in greater harmony with the eternal rightness of the good universe of God might be brought into being.

The reply to this assault was as difficult as the reply to those critics of the English Reformation who represent this event as merely the result of King Henry VIII's obstinate determination to rid himself of a wife who no longer suited him. It is as idle in the one case as in the other to attempt a direct reply. Such movements as the Reformation in Germany and in England are too vast and too complicated to be summed up in any such simple formula. The only way to reach an intelligent comprehension of them is to trace them back through the long and intricate development which brought society at last to such a point that there was no longer the possibility of compromise. It is not the personality of the leader nor the immediate circumstances about him, that are of the highest importance. These are the dramatic elements of the situation, and for that reason they are sure to attract and hold the attention. It would have been better if this violent and insolent attack had been allowed to pass in utter silence. But the undoubted learning and the high official position of the writer seemed a challenge which the Protestant scholars of Germany could not afford to neglect. With one accord they again rushed to the defence of their national and religious hero. A new deluge of pamphlets, each

aiming to place in its proper light some aspect of Luther's personality or some incident in his career, was poured out upon the world of readers. Especially, of course, the teachers of Church History in important universities, men like Harnack, Kawerau, Kolde, Walther, put themselves immediately on record as protesting alike against the spirit and the content of the offending book.

In the interval of barely ten years a whole literature has made its appearance. In general it must be said that the tone of the controversy on the Protestant side has been dignified and worthy of the traditions of the best historical scholarship. It has acknowledged frankly the few contributions which the learned Dominican has made to our actual knowledge. It has repudiated, so far as such repudiation was necessary, the extravagant laudation of the earlier days. But it has left no room for doubt as to its absolute rejection of the point of view and the conclusions of its adversary.

It was natural that Father Denifle, himself a "religious" and a Dominican at that, should have directed his attack with especial venom against Luther's whole relation to the monastic system. It was not merely that Luther had abandoned his monastic profession, broken his vows, and led multitudes of others to do the same. His chief offence was that he had misrepresented the sacred idea of the regular life. Luther's own utterances on the subject would lead us to believe that he had entered the monastery in order that he might secure deliverance from the sense of sin that was oppressing him. He had given it a fair trial. He had not been in the attitude of rebellion against the minuteness of the rule, which had marked the attitude of Erasmus, for example. On the contrary, he had conformed with scrupulous exactness to every requirement, in the vain hope that thus he might acquire the peace of mind he sought. Failing to find this relief, he had passed through a stage bordering on

despair, and out of this stage he had worked himself only through persistent study of the Bible and its interpretation in the light of the theology of Paul and Augustine. In other words, he had found through the process of personal experience his solution of the problem of personal sin and sinfulness. The method of conformity to a system of prescribed practices had failed. He had gone beyond and above all prescriptions to the personal and intimate relation of the sinful soul to the God who made it. Now this is what the dominant Church could not and cannot forgive. If the individual could thus leap over all the bounds of form and ceremony which it had established, then its occupation was gone, and it was quick to perceive this inevitable conclusion. Denifle did not waste his time in dwelling overmuch on the wickedness of breaking vows and seeking the gratification of sensual desire under the excuse of religious scruple. These things he characterizes with vicious side-thrusts which leave no doubt as to his opinion. What he chiefly dwells upon is the false-heartedness of Luther in professing any such idea of the monastic life. Luther ought to have known that the profession of the monk was not primarily a process intended for the deliverance from sin. The whole notion of the monastic vow as a "second baptism," whereby a man was sacramentally renewed in spirit, he declares to be a complete misapprehension. Not as a guarantee of spiritual perfection but only as an aid toward this end, is the regular life truly to be interpreted. All this Luther ought to have known and probably did know; so that he is guilty, not only of an overwrought hysterical motive in entering the monastery, but of deliberate lying about it when it became necessary to defend his apostasy. The answer to this particular charge of Denifle is admirably stated by Karl Benrath in his treatise on *Luther in the Monastery*.<sup>2</sup> It is made clear that this is only

<sup>2</sup> *Luther im Kloster (1505-1525)*, von Karl Benrath. 1905.

one of the countless illustrations of Denifle's controversial method. He begins always with the point he desires to make, then seeks for words of Luther which by some perverse ingenuity can be twisted into a self-condemnation, then draws his foregone conclusion, and proceeds to build upon this the foundation for a new indictment. Benrath shows by a perfectly just historical method that Luther was fully justified in the year 1505 in thinking that the monastery life would be the surest way to secure him the peace which his boy's soul craved. It is not necessary to imagine that he expected any miraculous demonstration of such a deliverance. His surrender to the requirements of the house would indicate the contrary. What he probably did expect was that through this surrender he would find himself growing daily in what he would have called the Christian character. When he did not find this, he began the course of questioning and reaction which finally carried him outside the bounds of the monastic relation.

It is unnecessary to dwell upon the foul insinuations with which Denifle pursues his victim during the years of struggle with the monastic limitations. Enough that his only material here consists of a series of scattered utterances of Luther himself, largely in personal letters, never specific in their references, and always leaving large room for interpretation, but used here with true Dominican inquisitorial cleverness in the sense most unfavorable to the defendant. Reduced to their lowest terms, they all fall back to the one simple statement that Luther was made a man and not a monk and believed that he was not singular in this respect. His unpardonable offence was that he believed a man was something better than a monk and did not hesitate to say so.

This note of personal abuse is continued throughout the discussion of Luther's early years, and furnishes the foundation upon which the whole judgment of his later

accomplishment is built. It has been the task of his Protestant defenders to show the falsity of the method and to illustrate this by reference to specific points. Denifle has then replied to his critics with sweeping accusations of a character quite in accordance with his assault upon Luther himself. The chief points in this rejoinder are found in the familiar charges of ignorance and falsehood. If we could accept this criticism, we should have to believe that all the vast output of German scholarship in the past two generations had been thrown away. These scholars, the most eminent in their field, are represented first as utterly incapable of understanding even the first principles of historical inquiry. Evidence means nothing to them, because they are constitutionally, or, if you please, confessionally disqualified to weigh and measure it. They cannot read the documents necessary to establish their opinion. They are ignorant of things that every Catholic child knows in its cradle. And then these ornaments of German scholarship, thus incapable of any worthy achievement, are united in a conspiracy to pervert the truth. They are worthy disciples of their master and involved in the same condemnation.

Denifle's book was received with jubilation by the Vatican wing of the papal party. By the more moderate and more decent element it met with distinct reproof for its vicious method, but was accepted as a final judgment upon the man and the movement it had condemned. Denifle himself had disclaimed the character of a Lutherbiographer. His work was, as he himself said, to trace the movement of the Reformation as embodied in the person of its leader back to its origins in a corrupt and decadent clericalism in the century previous. In so doing he set himself, as has been well shown by his critics, in distinct opposition to that other Catholic school of which Janssen and Pastor were the best representatives. They had maintained with a wealth of illustration that the

Church of the fifteenth century was doing very well indeed. Personal corruption and false leadership there were, to be sure, just as there is bound to be in all institutions intrusted to human hands, but the means of reformation were contained in the very constitution of the Church itself, and these agencies would have worked out the redemption of the Church in their own way and time, if only they had been given the chance.

In presenting their view of the case, they were always pointing forward to the time when these forces of regeneration should rally and find expression in the Counter-reformation of the late sixteenth century. Denifle, by throwing his emphasis on the corruptions of the fifteenth century, has only made the more clear to every seeing eye the hopelessness of the notion of a true reform without a shock of revolution. He has demonstrated that the system which had produced the papacy of the Borgias and the Medicis could never have been trusted to cleanse itself of the principle of decay that lay in its very structure.

The last volume of Denifle's book appeared in 1909. Within barely two years the problem of a complete biography of Luther, which he had definitely set aside, was taken up by another Catholic scholar of acknowledged eminence, the Jesuit, Hartmann Grisar, professor at the University of Innsbruck.<sup>3</sup> In this monumental work, in three ponderous volumes, Dr. Grisar has undertaken to present from the Roman point of view the life and work of Luther as a process of development. Like Denifle, he has sought for the moving springs of the reformer's action, but he has found them in a somewhat different source. Without specific reference to his predecessor, he frankly repudiates his whole theory of Luther's personal depravity as the origin of his fall from grace. In a few brief sentences he expresses his

<sup>3</sup> Luther, von Hartmann Grisar, S. J. 3 Bde. Freiburg im Breisgau, 1911.

opinion that the material for a judgment of Luther's early experiences, whether in his own utterances or those of others, is far too meagre to permit of confident conclusions. At the same time Grisar accepts the theory that loss of faith is "not uncommonly" (i, 86) the result of moral corruption; only he is unable to find this connection of fact in Luther's case. So also in his treatment of the charge against Luther that his whole attitude toward the monastic problem was determined by his conviction of the uncontrollable nature of sensual desire, Grisar is honest enough to see that Luther meant this to apply to every kind of temptation of the will toward selfish desire at the cost of others and did not mean to limit it to the single element of physical lust.

Nothing could be fairer than Grisar's statement of the principles he proposes to follow in his work. He declares himself unreservedly to be aiming at historical truth and nothing else. That is of course what all historians have done ever since there was any writing of history, and, as very few of them have been able to live up to their declarations of principle, so we need not charge it as an especial crime against Dr. Grisar that he also has allowed certain modifications to creep into his actual practice. For one thing, he makes it clear that his historical attitude must comprehend also a certain psychological position; and that is always a dangerous venture for the historian. To account for the actions of his subject, he must create for him a psychological condition, and when he has made such a condition satisfactory to himself he must refer everything to that. It is an attractive method. It offers at every turn the clew which the biographer is always seeking; but the honest historian knows that there is nothing more illusive than precisely these alluring clews. They are more than likely to lead him into the very snares which he is trying

to avoid. For, after all, a human genius is too subtle a thing to be formulated under the headings and sub-headings of the psychologist's system.

Another of Grisar's declarations deserves our notice. He explicitly declares his independence of the views of Denifle or of any other authority. He rejects with some little warmth the idea that there is or can be a "Catholic" verdict upon Luther's personal character and experiences. Only in the sense that, as a matter of course, every Catholic must approach the subject with "the doctrines and the essential institutions of the Church as his standard for Luther's opinions and reforms." Denifle's personal opinions, he says, were his own, and he claims for himself the same independence. That has a very fair sound; but notice the caution of this reservation. What are the dogmas, and which are the essential institutions of the Church? That is precisely the question at issue; and because this is the question, the party which is bound to assume as its standards the very things that are in dispute can never stand in a truly historical attitude toward the persons or the institutions which have rejected these standards. The protestations of Dr. Grisar therefore do infinite credit to his good-will, but offer little promise that through his activity any noteworthy progress toward a mutual understanding between the two great wings of western Christendom will be made.

If Dr. Grisar rejects Denifle's principle of moral degeneracy as the explanation of Luther and Lutheranism, what does he substitute for it? Mainly two motives, by which he thinks the downward course of the so-called reformer was determined. The first of these motives is an ever-increasing, uncontrollable self-concern, developing as time went on into a fatal self-assertion, a contempt of all authority except such as he could turn to the support of his own individual conclusions. It was

not that Luther based his opinion or his action upon Augustine or upon Scripture, but that, having through his own perverse activity come to certain conclusions, he then found, or wished others to think he had found, support in these undoubted foundations of Christian tradition. The other motive, upon which Dr. Grisar dwells with great emphasis and prolonged argument, is Luther's sensitiveness to mystical influences. To his mind, already started upon its quest for a new source of spiritual satisfaction, came the subtle suggestions of what our author calls a "false mysticism." By that I understand him to mean a mysticism which over-emphasizes the individual process of reaching religious satisfaction through personal, spiritual communion with the source of all spiritual certainty. Such over-emphasis seems to him—and in this he is undoubtedly right—to underestimate the importance of those other methods of approaching the divine bestower of peace to the soul which the Church has systematized and the key to which it claims to hold. That is a distinction which to the Roman Catholic must always seem decisive. The Church could never afford to question or even to minimize the importance of a profound spiritual attitude of the believer toward the highest problems of the Christian experience. What it could, on the other hand, equally not afford to give up was the claim that such a spiritual attitude should express itself in forms recognized and controlled by the organized system of the Church's administration. Whoever allowed himself to come too directly into personal relation with the God who had made him and to whom he was responsible, must inevitably seem to be setting himself in a certain opposition to the existing system of the Church. It is these two elements taken together, an uncontrollable self-assertiveness and a morbid sensitiveness to imagined spiritual suggestion, that constitute Grisar's Luther-psy-

chology. Starting with these, it is easy to refer to them every individual act of the reform programme.

It is a pleasure to turn from the directly controversial pamphlets written in reply to the Roman assault, and to notice the steady progress of busy scholars in presenting continually new evidence of Luther's actual work and thought. Such a bit of carefully studied evidence is Johannes Ficker's edition of Luther's *Lectures on the Epistle to the Romans*.<sup>4</sup> Long known and used by scholars in copy, it was reserved to Professor Ficker to utilize the Berlin manuscript in Luther's own hand. We have here, reproduced in a beautiful edition, the Latin text as Luther copied it out, his brief notes marginal and interlinear, and then his commentary, the main substance of the lectures. One sees here the complete process of Luther's thought in the two years (1515-16) immediately before his first great appeal to the world with the Ninety-five Theses of 1517. We can trace his studies in all authorities, ancient and modern. We can see how at a given point he must have received the new Greek Testament of Erasmus, and how from there on he profited at every step by its use. We learn from this illustration how Luther was feeling his way, deeply impressed with the great leading thought of justification by faith, yet feeling always the apparent contradiction between this and the imperative duty to do right, and so seeking to reconcile these two through a complete understanding of Paul's deepest meaning as interpreted by Augustine.

A very useful little contribution is Professor Scheel's collection of documents<sup>5</sup> selected especially to illustrate Luther's development down to the year 1519. In his preface the author enumerates more than forty books

<sup>4</sup> Luther's Vorlesung über den Römerbrief, 1515-16. Herausgegeben von Johannes Ficker. 2 Bde. Leipzig, 1908.

<sup>5</sup> Dokumente zu Luthers Entwicklung (bis 1519), von D. Otto Scheel. 1911.

and articles which have appeared since 1900 on this subject. The documents here given are arranged by topics, and under these they are grouped as far as possible according to the volumes of Luther's writings. Intended primarily for the use of special students, they form an interesting body of evidence on the much-discussed main question as to Luther's sincere and irresistible progress toward the convictions which from 1519 on were to dominate his action.

One of the most difficult problems of Luther's early career is that of his relation to the established civil powers. The prince under whose immediate authority he lived, the Elector Frederic of Saxony, was well known for his sturdy and orthodox piety and his generally conservative character. How was it possible for Luther to speak and act with such freedom, not to say such reckless boldness, without being checked from the start by this civil control? The answer is at least partially to be found in the personality of Georg Spalatin, the Elector's most trusted counsellor, and at the same time the devoted friend, admirer, and patron of Luther.<sup>6</sup> Between the two there went on for many years a voluminous correspondence, very much of which has been preserved, and on the basis of which this volume of Dr. Berbig has been written. To one who is willing to follow it carefully it demonstrates anew, and from a quite different side, the same fundamental fact: that Luther's intellectual and spiritual progress was a slow but steady development of a central idea working itself out under the influence at once of continuous study and a rich experience of life. It supplies the evidence which proves at the same time Luther's substantial equipment of worldly wisdom. He recognized from the beginning that it would be idle to protest and proclaim unless he were

<sup>6</sup> Georg Spalatin und sein Verhältniss zu Martin Luther bis zum Jahre 1525, von Georg Berbig. 1906.

to find support in the temporal powers, and his relations with Spalatin show the consistent application of this principle. As Melanchthon was Luther's foil on the theological side, so was Spalatin on the political. It is only regrettable that Luther did not have the orderly habit which led Spalatin to preserve his correspondence. We are in consequence obliged for the most part to reconstruct the contents of the chancellor's letters from Luther's replies; but even so we gain from this publication an inspiring picture of Spalatin's wise and cautious, but at the same time liberal and generous support of Luther's early activity.

The same problem, only in much finer detail, is considered in Kalkoff's study of the early treatment of Luther's case by the Roman tribunal.<sup>7</sup> Probably few readers can quite realize how delicate the situation was in the year 1518; how slight a change in the balance of forces would have thrown Luther into the hands of Rome, and how little hope there would then have been that he would escape the final penalty of his rashness. To accomplish this result only one little jog at the right point in the mechanism of the papal-imperial-German-nationalistic machinery was needed. If the Elector Frederic of Saxony had yielded for a moment to the pressure brought to bear on him by the clever diplomacy of the Curia acting through Cardinal Cajetan, and had let Luther slip out from under his protection, the cause of German reform would probably have been indefinitely postponed.

Kalkoff's investigations in Italian archives have made it possible for every student to see for himself all there is to see in the way of original documentary evidence for this complicated bit of diplomacy. The volume is made up partly of narrative and partly of registers of documents arranged in chronological order and accom-

<sup>7</sup> *Forschungen zu Luthers Römischen Prozess*, von Paul Kalkoff. Rom, 1905.

panied by a running commentary. The documentary chapters are the most instructive and are hardly less readable than the narrative; which is a model of everything that a literary style—even a German literary style—ought not to be. Even so, however, the effort to understand it is well worth making, if only to gain one more convincing proof of the quality, both active and passive, of the steadfast Elector.

American scholars also have been making their worthy contribution to this work of the past decade. *The Political Theories of Martin Luther*, by Dr. L. H. Waring,<sup>8</sup> is a study of the reformer's relation to the many practical questions involving governmental control over the action of the individual which were forced upon him by the immediate demands of the time. In this, as in every other field of his activities, Luther was an opportunist rather than an abstract theorist. He met the several crises of his career with such practical suggestions as each seemed to require, and then defended his advice by reference to general principles. Inevitably he was led into declarations that were more or less self-contradictory. Dr. Waring has collected these various utterances and so put them together as to show the varying attitude of their author at different times, but also to illustrate his well-balanced conception of the nature, the functions, and the rights of civil government in dealing with subjects who themselves had rights equally original and inalienable, or, to use Luther's own phraseology, equally divine. The chapter on the Right of Reform and Revolution is especially instructive in this respect. It shows the reformer in the sternest conflict of principles; on the one hand, his instinctive love of liberty and sympathy with the oppressed; on the other, his profound conviction of the importance of civil order as the indis-

<sup>8</sup> *The Political Theories of Martin Luther*, by Luther Hess Waring. G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1910.

pensable foundation of a true liberty and an effective justice.

A monument of industry and patience in the least attractive field of Lutheran studies is *The Confessional History of the Lutheran Church*,<sup>9</sup> by the late Professor Richard of the Gettysburg Theological Seminary. After a brief but comprehensive review of the political, social, and dogmatic conditions of the first twelve years of the Lutheran movement, there follow some two hundred pages, about one-third of the volume, on the inception, the completion, presentation, and confutation of the Augsburg Confession of 1530. Although the author's point of view is, of course, the conservative Lutheran, he presents all the aspects of the amazingly difficult problem with singular fairness. We are made to see and to feel the critical moments when a false step or a timid policy might have endangered the whole cause of religious freedom for Germany and so for the world. The final formula of the Augsburg Confession was a monumental testimony to the spirit of compromise where compromise was possible, and of unshakable firmness when further yielding would have sacrificed fundamental principles and the great practical results already attained. The figure of Luther as the motive force, the beloved and revered teacher, and yet as obviously not the man to be intrusted with so delicate a mission, is brought out into clear relief. Already the current of events was sweeping on more rapidly than he or any other man could have foreseen and was carrying him along with it to results he would certainly not have welcomed.

The remainder of the volume is devoted chiefly to the working out of the several lines of dogmatic speculation started by the Lutheran revolt. On the one hand, we have the principle of liberty, once set in motion never

<sup>9</sup> *The Confessional History of the Lutheran Church*, by James W. Richard. Published for the author by the Lutheran Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1909.

again to be completely checked. On the other, we see the demand for uniformity, localized in the several principalities, and, happily, having no central organ of expression. The conflict of these two ideas is reflected in the long series of doctrinal formulations which are the subject of the present volume. Dr. Richard was not blind to the outward pettiness and evil temper of these discussions, but he has succeeded in maintaining throughout an objective, judicial attitude which gives to the non-Lutheran reader an almost sympathetic understanding of the real historic value of this apparently hopeless period. It shows itself as a stage of transition from the first generous enthusiasm of Luther's day to the fresh and vigorous impulse of modern German rational thought.

The two biographies of Luther by Professor McGiffert<sup>10</sup> and Dr. Preserved Smith,<sup>11</sup> both published in 1911, were noticed in this *Review* (April, 1912). They are both written for the general reader; the former as the natural overflow of the ripe learning and long experience of the mature scholar and the inspiring teacher, the latter as the first-fruits of a well-trained student showing thorough familiarity with the material and a gift of lucid presentation.

The promise of the latter work has since been well maintained by the first volume of Dr. Smith's translations from Luther's correspondence,<sup>12</sup> which appeared in 1913 and was noticed in this *Review* (October, 1913).

What now is to be our conclusion from this array of testimony on the one side and the other, as to the true Luther? I cannot see that the judgment of sound, reasonable, historically minded Protestant writers, begin-

<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, the Man and his Work, by A. C. McGiffert. The Century Co., 1911.

<sup>11</sup> The Life and Letters of Martin Luther, by Preserved Smith. Houghton Mifflin Co., 1911.

<sup>12</sup> Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters, translated and edited by Preserved Smith. Vol. 1 (1507-1521). Philadelphia, The Lutheran Publication Society, 1913.

ning with Julius Köstlin and continuing down to the present day, needs any serious modification. The essential basis for a calm and rational verdict was laid as soon as the extravagant laudation of strict confessional advocacy was abandoned. Luther has shared in the general clearing of the historical vision that has been one of the most marked phenomena of the age of science. To understand him even half thoroughly we must indeed look at him in his historical setting and in the light of his psychological make-up. The charge that he was an individual rather than a type is true. What concerns us today is not whether a man has an aggressive, self-assertive personality, but rather, supposing he has, what use he makes of it. In itself, the demonic obsession with world-moving ideas, such as Luther charges upon himself, is not a ground of suspicion to the modern world. On the contrary, it is precisely to such inspired leaders that we look as the real motive powers in all the great world-movements. When we find such a character, we do not expect to see him moving in the ruts of tradition or employing the gentle methods of the trained diplomatist. Rather we look to see him carried on and sometimes out of himself by the very greatness of his mission.

It is not the impetuous rush of his words in assault or the passionate inconsistencies of detail in his defence that offend us or cause us to lose confidence in his integrity. We are not repelled by seeming contradictions either in his utterance or in his action. What we admire and cling to is the thread of consistent devotion to some one guiding principle, pointing to some far-away hope or some shining ideal of the future. The enthusiasts who cannot claim our sympathy are those whose fire burns out in idle effort, or turns and consumes them because they are not made of the stuff that can bear the fierce heat of the conflict they have aroused. But Luther is not one of these. His was indeed an aggressive personality; but

it was so because of the passionate devotion with which he threw himself into the cause, which he believed to be the cause of God and God's truth. By nature he does not seem to have been of the typical reforming temper. On the contrary, every bit of evidence points to him as being in his youth rather of the shrinking, sensitive quality, that seeks its support in the institutions amid which his lot is cast. He was a good son, a docile and obedient scholar, zealous, probably over-zealous in the punctilious performance of his cloister-routine. He was a trusted official of his order, sent at the age of twenty-seven to Rome as its representative in important affairs, continuing, through the seven years that followed, in all the detail of his several functions as university professor, as parish priest, and as member of his order, without resistance within or criticism from without. He was thirty-four years old before he found himself driven by an irresistible inner impulse to say what had long been shaping itself in his thought about the obvious evils of the Church.

Surely that is not the radical temper. And yet the same steadfastness of purpose which had held him true to his obligations up to the last moment, now worked with equal intensity to hold him faithful to the new obligations into which his new position led him. When on that eve of All Saints he sent out into the world his challenge of the Propositions on Indulgence and Grace, he committed himself to an attitude which admitted of no compromise. Either he must abandon his position or he must go forward. To have gone back would be, as John Huss had said a hundred years before at Constance, to desert all those faithful souls who were now looking to him for leadership. In going on, he was launching out upon an unknown sea. It was impossible to foretell whether the winds that seemed most favorable would not drive him upon the rocks, or fail and leave

him to drift upon the sands. That was to be the most cruel test of his quality, and it is precisely there that hostile criticism finds its welcome opportunity.

It must be admitted that Luther's policy—if indeed we can think of him as having any fixed policy at all—was a policy of opportunism. What the factors were going to be that at any moment would determine his action could not even vaguely be predicted. The opposition of Rome could, of course, be counted upon; but that was the least of his concerns. On that point his mind was made up. What really pressed upon him with at times almost crushing weight was that sense of responsibility to those who now, quite without his previous knowledge and contrary to his expectation, were hailing him as the spokesman of their own deepest convictions and the herald of their most exalted hopes. I do not hesitate to say that now, after criticism has done its worst, the dominant impression of Luther is that of an eminently conservative and constructive genius. His conservative quality was shown as soon as the more radical elements of the revolt against Rome began to make themselves felt and to claim kinship with him. From his Patmos on the Wartburg he watched the gathering of these forces of destruction, then descended upon them and scattered them once for all out of the territory where his own chief constructive work was to be done. In the fury of the peasant outbreak, after a first attempt at reconciliation, he threw himself with all the ardor of his glowing temperament upon the side of social order and reconstruction. No sooner had he in the dramatic scene outside the gate of Wittenberg thrown the ancient law-book of the Church into the flames, than he began to work out with infinite pains and difficulty the plan of a new church-law based upon a harmonious working of the civil powers and the newly organized clergy. On the doctrinal side, recognizing

the spiritual value of the traditional sacramental scheme, he fought to the bitter end the battle of what he considered the crucial element in that scheme—the doctrine of the Real Presence in the Eucharistic ceremony. Finally, in that extraordinary document, the Augsburg Confession of 1530, we see the culmination of this conservative and constructive work. In its dignity, its moderation, and its firmness we read, not indeed the hand, but most truly the heart and soul of Luther.

It is obvious that a character of this type lends itself with peculiar readiness to hostile criticism. The worst as well as the best that has ever been said of him can be supported by reference to his own utterances. His was eminently an expansive nature. What he felt strongly at a given moment he must share with whoever would listen. He was subject to great and violent changes of mood. In his moments of exaltation no words were too strong to express his confidence in the truth of his position. In the depths of his depression he was overwhelmed at times with his own boldness. It was to be expected that under the influence of these changing moods he would say many a thing that seemed absolutely to contradict his former declarations. It is the easiest possible kind of criticism to pick out these separate utterances and weave them into an apparently unanswerable charge of mere opportunist policy leading to the more serious one of deliberate falsehood. Such a method, however, is as false as it is cruel. It is a violation of the first principle of historical judgment—that a man must be measured, not by individual words or deeds, but by the whole completed record of his accomplishment, and by the dominant motive of his life.

Criticism of Luther merges naturally into a criticism of Lutheranism and thus of Protestantism in general. We are told that the work of Luther set back the wheels of progress for at least a century. We are pointed to the

pitiful divisions among Christians, due to the emphasizing of petty points of difference, to sectarian intolerance, to the fanaticisms that from time to time have disgraced and endangered the name of Christianity itself. We are asked to contrast the splendors of art and the glories of literature which belong to the noble record of triumphant Catholicism, with the poverty of the worship and the sordidness of discipline that have often marked the Protestant communities; and then we are expected to imagine that if it had not been for Luther and his work, the world would have gone right on under the mild sway of Leo the Medicean and his successors, developing all that seems to us now attractive and correcting or suppressing all that was repellent. Is there anything in the situation of European affairs in the year 1517, or in the story of Roman Catholicism through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which can make us strike the balance so as to appear more favorable to that side of the account?

Certainly, to the open-minded student the answer cannot be doubtful. We can ask nothing better for this great spiritual leader than to have all the light possible thrown upon him from every source. And if in the fierce illumination of hostile controversy some dark spots seem to grow even darker than before, there will be ample compensation in the clearer judgment of the man as a whole. Let us be grateful for every contribution to this judgment, no matter from what source it may come; but let us not for a moment lose out of sight that one foundation-principle of Protestantism—that no earthly power shall stand between a man and his God, and that there are many roads leading to the Kingdom of Heaven.